

## Investigating the Effectiveness of Task Types on Vocabulary Learning in Multilevel Language Ability Classes

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### Abstract

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) utilizes a set of tasks that are representative of how learners perform when they are actually involved in real-life and real-time complex situations to elicit authentic samples of language use. This study investigated the effectiveness of using different task types in promotion of vocabulary learning among students of differing language ability in Iranian secondary schools. One hundred and twenty students of third-grade in secondary school participated in the study that were assigned to three groups of elementary, lower intermediate, and intermediate based on their performance in language proficiency and placement tests. The experimental group received instruction through three task types namely 'listen and do', 'classification of related items' and 'practice through dialog' for four weeks, two sessions a week. The results indicated no statistically significant difference among students' performance across the three task types; however, their language proficiency level significantly influenced their performance in vocabulary learning. Implications for curriculum development and policy making in EFL/ESL education have been discussed.

**Key words:** Task type, task-based language teaching, EFL/ESL, vocabulary learning

### Introduction

The process of second/foreign language (L2) teaching and learning is a complex undertaking which has undergone many methodological shifts over the years. Following the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the early 1980s that provided a new methodological option for teaching and learning of a second language, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was made popular in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) as a subcategory of CLT. Placing considerable importance on learner's knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings and functions in order to be able to use the language appropriate to the given situation, CLT attracted attention and acceptance from various scholars of the field.

Bearing in mind the fact that a single linguistic form can often convey several meanings and understandings while serving many functions at the same time, L2 learners are required to master a diversity of linguistic forms and functions in order to be able to manage the complex process of message conveyance and interaction with other L2 speakers. Second/foreign language teachers have always been striving to employ the most convenient and efficient ways of establishing situations which are optimal to promote learning among students. In pursuit of such an effective discipline to satisfy the demands of L2 pedagogy, CLT and its offspring Task-Based Instruction (TBI) came to an existence in the world of second language acquisition.

TBI stresses utilizing a set of tasks that are representative of how learners perform when they are actually involved in real-life and often real-time complex situations. The tenet of TBLT is a pedagogical shift from teacher-oriented to more learner-oriented teaching (East, 2012). Increasingly, by realizing the fact that effective and efficient learning/acquisition of a second language takes place when the acquired knowledge is practiced and used in real life

communications, the use of tasks as some 'tools to elicit samples of language use' as Ellis (2003) notes, attracted much attention and proposed a challenging alternative to the field of SLA.

### **Defining a Task**

The concept of task is central to many theories of classroom teaching and learning. Tasks have been defined in a variety of ways in the literature. Prabhu (1987) as one of the earlier initiators of the idea, views a task as a 'meaning-focused activity in the classroom'. He points out that such an activity might be under three different forms: information-gap activity, reasoning-gap activity and/or opinion-gap activity. Information-gap activity involves "transfer of a given information from one person to another . . ." reasoning-gap activity entails "deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns" and opinion-gap activity involves "identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation" (Prabhu, 1987, pp. 46-47).

Skehan (1996) defines a task as an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. Other scholars have looked at a task from various perspectives. For instance, Ellis (2003) summarizes a task as comprising four main characteristics: (a) it involves a primary focus on (pragmatic) meaning, (b) it has some kind of 'gap', (3) the participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete the task, and (d) it has a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome.

After reviewing key definitions from the TBL literature, Nunan () presents a task as: "a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, a middle and an end."

Further understandings of the concept, is provided in Ellis's (2004, p. 4) comprehensive collection of task definitions delineated in the literature by a number of renowned scholars of the field.

### **Task-based language teaching**

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) utilizes a set of tasks that are representative of how learners perform when they are actually involved in real-life and often real-time complex situations to elicit authentic samples of language use. TBLT constitutes a strong version of CLT. Ellis (2003) argues that tasks provide the basis for an entire language curriculum; however, that task-based language teaching is not the only way of achieving a strong version of CLT.... Clearly a strong version of CLT can be realized in a variety of ways, not by tasks. Nevertheless, tasks can function as a useful device for planning a communicative curriculum, particularly in contexts where there are few opportunities for more authentic communicative experiences, for example, many FL situations. Carter and Nunan (2001) characterize CLT as an approach to the teaching of language which emphasizes the uses of languages by the learner in a range of contexts and for a range of purposes; CLT emphasizes speaking and listening in real settings and does not only prioritize the development of reading and writing skills; methodologies for CLT tend to encourage active learner involvement in a wide range of activities and tasks and strategies for communication.

Carter and Nunan (2001) point out that one feature of TBL is that learners carrying out a task are free to use any language they can to achieve the outcome: language forms are not prescribed in

advance. As language users, human beings have an innate capacity to work out ways of expressing meanings. Learners do not simply take note of new language input and attempt to reproduce it. They are not aiming to reproduce a series of language forms in conformity with target norms. Their aim in language use is to create a meaning system which they can operate rapidly and efficiently in real time. In order to achieve this goal they will use and develop language forms to which they have been recently exposed, but they will also adopt strategies which are not sanctioned by the target norms.

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics for task-based instruction, the inclusion of some type of instruction on the formal aspects of target language can also be found in the guidelines of task-based language instruction. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research supports a focus on form which uses pedagogical tasks to draw learners' attention to particular aspects of the language code which are naturally embedded in the tasks (Long & Robinson, 1998). Likewise, Skehan (1992, as cited in Carter and Nunan 2001, p.174) argues that unless we encourage a focus on form, learners will develop more effective strategies for achieving communicative goals without an accompanying development of their language system. They will develop a 'classroom dialect', which enables them to exchange meanings in spite of the shortcomings of their language. As a result they may fossilize at a relatively low level of language development. He suggests that learning is promoted by the need to communicate, but argues that learning will be more efficient if:

- there is a need to focus on accuracy within a task-based methodology, and
- there is a critical focus on language form within the task-based cycle.

In short, task-based language teaching appeared to meet the basic requirements of learners in different settings, from children to adults, with varying levels of language proficiency. By engaging learners in more meaningful and naturalistic communication, as it is in real-life situations, by providing opportunities for meaningful use and promotion of language learning, and at the same time by striking a balance between form and meaning, task-based language teaching has gained prominence over other approaches to language teaching and learning over the past years. In TBL approaches, therefore, language development is promoted by language use, with the study of language form playing a secondary role.

### **Principles of task-based instruction**

Task based language instruction mainly emphasizes the employment of a variety of tasks that involve language learners in the process of active communication so that they can pick up the language by doing and performing. Some basic principles of TBI can be summarized as: authenticity, learner-centeredness, and intentional and interactive use of the language, where task completion plays a substantial role.

Nunan (2004) outlines some pedagogic principles and practices of task-based language teaching as follows:

- A needs-based approach to content selection.
- An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- The provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself.
- An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- The linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.

Having been introduced well into the world of language pedagogy, TBI has now gained a more established position in recent language teaching methodology as opposed to those of

traditional, less direct and less communicative approaches. This is evidenced in numerous research studies relating to TBI (e.g., East, 2012; Ellis, 2003; Lee, 2000, Nunan, 2004; Plews, & Zhao 2010). Underscoring the role of authentic tasks in language pedagogy, these studies have highlighted the role of meaningful content in interaction among learners and have focused attention on the authenticity and meaningfulness of communication. As such, by employment of different task types to facilitate language teaching-learning processes, TBI has been acknowledged as an important contributor to second language education and research throughout these studies. However, there is considerable controversy as to which approach is the most effective, and as Ellis (2005) contends, the research and theories do not give definite answers on what types of instruction can best facilitate language learning.

### **Objectives of the study**

Despite the fact that several studies have investigated the effects of tasks on several aspects of L2 learning, to the author's best knowledge, studies on whether different task types can have different effects on students' language learning have been quite scant. Regarding the context of the current study- Iranian secondary schools- no published studies are found that have tried to establish relationships between task types employed in teaching and their effects on students' language learning. The current study, then, aims to provide insights into the relationships between task types used in teaching L2 vocabulary and learners' performance in vocabulary learning. More specifically, the study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

**RQ#1:** Does task type affect students' vocabulary learning in multilevel language ability classes?

**RQ#2:** Does students' proficiency level affect their vocabulary learning through different task types?

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

A total of 120 third-grade secondary school students in the city of Tehran, Iran participated in the study. All third-grade students making up five classes in a secondary school were included in the study during the spring semester. Two classes out of five were considered as the control group who received no treatment, while the other three, taken as the experimental group were subjected to the intended and designed task-based instruction. Since the participants' awareness of the study might have affected their performance and consequently the validity of the study, they were not informed of their participation in the study until the data were collected.

The subjects attended English classes twice a week during the school year and took no regular language classes during three months of summer holidays. They were roughly of the same age – 16 to 18 teenage schoolboys with approximately the same language background. Each class session normally lasted for one and a half hours.

The control group received their traditional, form-based language instruction based on the designed curriculum practiced regularly by the teacher. On the other hand, under TBI framework, the experimental group received a task-based, communicative instruction focusing on implicit meaning conveyance. The new materials were developed under the premises TBI framework, by the searcher who was the teacher of all five classes during the year.

Task based materials were developed in a way that the vocabulary items in students' textbooks were incorporated within the tasks to be completed by the students. Hence, the

experimental group was taught the new vocabulary items in each lesson through practicing three types of tasks considered for this purpose.

### **Materials**

To determine the proficiency level of the students so as to divide them into homogeneous groups, two sets of tests were administered before the study: a placement test that the subjects were expected to be familiar with its content, as it was based on their previous year textbooks, and a pretest with a quite unfamiliar content to them, provided based on their new textbook. Both test materials were developed and developed and validated by the researcher. The two types of tests, made it possible to have two sets of analyses: one on the basis of students' general vocabulary knowledge tested via a placement test which allowed classifying the subjects into three homogeneous groups in three levels as *elementary*, *lower intermediate* and *intermediate*. The other were used to make comparisons with those of the posttest to see the effects of the treatment. Due to participants' lower listening skills as well as availability of authentic audio or visual means, both pretest and posttest materials were provided in written form.

### **Procedure**

From the total number of 120 students, as shown in (Table 1), 8 students were eliminated from the data analyses. Five students were outliers, scoring either too low or too high in the placement and the pre-test, and 3 students failed to attend all treatment sessions. Therefore, 112 students successfully participated in the study for 4 weeks, two sessions of one and a half hours per week. To make sure that the participants were not familiar with the given words earlier to teaching sessions, they were asked to write the meaning of 60 English words (Appendix B) in their L1 before the instruction. Out of 60 words, 25 incorrect or unanswered items were selected as new words to the participants. The three task types then were designed based on these new vocabulary items. The three task types employed for the purpose of the study were as follows:

- (1) *listen and do*
- (2) *practice through dialogs*
- (3) *classification of related items*

The three task types were assigned randomly each for a class. That is, task 1 (listen and do) was selected and worked on in class one, task 2 (practice through dialog) for class two, and task 3 (classification of related items) was presented to class three. Due to time constraints performing all three tasks in all three classes was not practical.

Based on the premises of TBI, each task consisted of three phases to be accomplished: pre-task, during-task and post-task. Before completion of each task, in pre-task phase, any requirement to follow each task in terms of allotted time, procedures to perform the activities, and grouping participants was met by the teacher. The purpose of pre – task phase is to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition. Dornyei (2001, as cited in Ellis 2004) emphasizes the importance of presenting a task in a way that motivates learners.

Next, in during - task phase, students attempted successful learning of the specified vocabulary items through completion of given tasks. This phase is the actual performance of a task that is planned by the teacher prior to the completion of each task.

And finally, in post-task phase, the students' performance is reinforced by repetition, or asking them to give their opinions on how they did the task and what was new to them in comparison to their previous experiences of vocabulary learning. Ellis (2004) has provided three major pedagogical goals for this stage: (1) to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of a task; (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed; and (3) to encourage attention to



form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task.

Examples of the tasks that were used in posttest to assess the students' progress in vocabulary learning included *fill in the blanks*, *completion items*, *matching items*, *error-identification*, *translation from L2 to L1*, and *multiple choice vocabulary items*.

To show the effect of different task types on learners' performance in vocabulary learning through TBI, their scores in pretest were compared with those of the posttest within and among groups.

### Results and discussion

Based on the results of the placement test conducted to identify the students' language proficiency level, those scoring from 1 to 11.86, from 11.78 to 14.2, and from 14.3 to 20 (as the highest mark in the education system) were assigned to elementary, lower intermediate and intermediate levels, respectively. Table 1 indicates these figures as well as the range of scores for each level based on the placement and pretest results.

**Table 1. Frequency and range of scores for each level based on placement and pretest**

Language Level	Based on Placement					Based on Pretest				
	Score Range	Freq	%	Mean	SD	Score Range	Freq	%	Mean	SD
EL	1-11.86	33	29.5	12.16	2.02	1-10.69	37	33.0	3.56	1.21
LI	11.87-14.2	38	33.9	12.79	2.38	10.70-15.37	39	34.8	6.96	0.96
IN	14.3-20	41	36.6	14.18	2.18	15.38-20	36	32.1	10.84	1.45
Total	-	112	100	13.03	2.34	-	112	100	7.08	3.19

- EL = Elementary LI= Lower Intermediate IN= Intermediate Freq= Frequency

To show the difference between students' proficiency levels across the two types of classification, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The results (as presented in Table 2.2) indicate that in both ways of classification, participants are significantly different from one another ( $F_{\text{placement}}(2,111) = 8.85$ ,  $F_{\text{pretest}}(2,111) = 10.32$ ,  $p = .00$ ).

**Table 2. One-way ANOVA: Language level identification based on pretest and placement test classification**

	Some Squares		df		Mean Square		F		Sig.	
	Pr	Pl	Pr	Pl	Pr	Pl	Pr	Pl	Pr	Pl
Between Group	11.62	10.26	2	2	5.81	5.13	10.32	8.85	0.00*	0.00*
Within Group	61.36	63.16	109	106	0.56	0.58				
Total	72.99	73.42	111	111						

Pr= pretest, Pl=placement, \*= statistically significant at  $P < 0.05$

In order to find out the effect of task type on vocabulary learning across different language ability levels, addressed by RQ#1, a two-way ANOVA was run across the three task types and the three identified language ability levels. As shown in Table 2, the difference among participants' performance across the three task types is not statistically significant ( $F_{(2, 66)} = .262$ ,  $P = .262$ ), implying that

the type of the task used for teaching vocabulary does not make significant contribution to students' understanding and improvement of vocabulary knowledge in a second language.

Looking at students' performance across the three task types shows that they performed less successfully in "listen and do" compared to "dialog" and "classification of related items". This implies that *listen and do* task is a more complex and demanding activity type that requires the learners to have knowledge of other elements of the language such as intonation and stress pattern, pragmatic competence, and listening skills apart from their lexical knowledge. Other possible interpretation for such a difference might be explained so that cognitive complexity, level of abstractedness, modality, time-boundedness or tasks being performed in a unidirectional or bidirectional way can influence the learners' performance of the tasks.

In a similar vein, the higher mean scores in *dialog* task compared to the other two types indicates that dialogs are more appropriate tasks to improve students' language ability in terms of vocabulary knowledge. This finding is in line with the Anton's (1999) statement as cited in Ellis (2004, p.177) contending that verbal interaction can be monologic or dialogic. Whereas both can serve to mediate learning, dialogic interaction is seen as central. Dialogic interaction enables an expert (such as a teacher) to create a context in which novices can participate actively in their own learning and in which the expert can fine-tune the support that the novice is given.

**Table 3. Analysis based on subjects' performance in placement test**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	231.867	8	28.983	3.883	0.001
Intercept	11620.009	1	11620.009	1556.765	0.000*
LGLEVPLC	177.289	2	88.645	11.876	0.000*
TASK_TYPE	21.362	2	10.681	1.431	0.247
LGLEVPLC* TASK_TYPE	40.337	4	10.084	1.351	0.262
Error	432.924	58	7.464		
Total	13534.910	67			

\*= statistically significant at  $P < 0.05$

However, further analysis shows that students' performance in the three language ability levels are meaningfully different, indicating that language proficiency per se creates a difference while performing a task by the learners.

**Table 4. Analysis based on subjects' performance in pretest**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	391.37	8	48.92	10.37	0.000
Intercept	12508.28	1	12508.28	2653.41	0.000*
TASK_TYPE	12.74	2	6.37	1.35	0.267
LGLEVPRE	337.62	2	168.81	35.81	0.000*
TASK_TYPE* LGLEVPRE	31.68	4	7.92	1.68	0.167
Error	273.41	58	4.71		
Total	13534.91	67			
Corrected Total	664.79	66			

\*= statistically significant at  $P < 0.05$

Lack of meaningful difference between elementary and lower intermediate levels can suggest that to perform successfully on a task a threshold level of language ability is required. As displayed in Table 4, similar to the results obtained from the placement test, the difference among participants' performance across the three task types was not statistically significant ( $F_{(2, 66)} = 1.35$ ,  $P = .267$ ) in the pretest either. This implies that improvement of vocabulary knowledge has not varied among the students to a considerable degree across different task types.

Further analysis of the results (shown in Table 4) reveals that the difference between the three identified language levels is statistically significant ( $F_{(2, 66)} = 35.81$ ,  $P = .000$ ), indicating the fact that participants' background language ability has affected their performance during performance and completion of tasks.

In addition, like the results from the placement test, no statistical significance was observed in the interaction between task type and language level in the pretest-based analysis. These findings suggest that students' proficiency is not improved by the type of the task but rather their knowledge of linguistic and non-linguistic components plays a crucial role in learners' vocabulary learning improvement.

It was also noticed that the interaction between task type and language proficiency level is not significant, indicating that language proficiency level and task type have a kind of reciprocal influence on the performance of tasks. In other words, it is assumed that in performing tasks, lower proficiency might be compensated by learners' non-linguistic knowledge that they take advantage of to comprehend the new lexicon in a given text or context. Ellis (1995) discusses that there is general agreement that 'knowing' a word involves knowing: its spoken and written contexts of use; its patterns with words of related meaning as well as its collocational patterns; its syntactic, pragmatic and discoursal patterns.

### Conclusion

This study was an attempt to investigate the impact of different task types on learning vocabulary in multilevel language ability classes where English is taught as second/foreign language. The three task types employed in the study was "listen and do", "classification of related items", and "practice through dialog". The analysis showed that the effect of task type on students' vocabulary knowledge was not statistically meaningful suggesting that the type of the task employed in teaching vocabulary does not make significant contribution to students' understanding and improvement of vocabulary knowledge. However, further analysis of the data revealed that students' task performance is considerably affected by their language ability level. Additionally, the lack of statistically significant difference between elementary and lower intermediate levels indicates that successful task performance and completion requires a threshold level of language proficiency.

The results indicate that although the type of the task, through which language items are presented in the teaching-learning process, may not have an immediate impact on students' further attainment, the learners' background knowledge of the language does play a significant role in their vocabulary learning. This emphasizes the importance of providing enough pragmatic and discoursal input to L2 learners before involving them in task performance.

Findings indicates that other things being equal, the kind of task is not the key factor in vocabulary achievement, but rather the quality of interaction through which instruction takes place can be affected by students' background knowledge. Hence, teachers are suggested to be more sensitive to crediting students of lower proficiency who are not qualified enough to be placed in upper grades.



This study has also particular relevance to the kind of exercises and activities included in textbooks. Since diversity of tasks can increase the opportunities of meaning exchange and interaction in the classroom, hence reinforce the quality of vocabulary acquisition, inclusion of appropriate task types in school curricula based on students' proficiency level is strongly recommended.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Task – based teaching as a relatively new approach to language teaching has a wide range of unexplored aspects. Thus as far as it is concerned with this study, the following suggestions are made for conducting similar studies and carrying out further research:

- The interaction between task type and language proficiency did not show significant difference, indicating that language proficiency and task type have a kind of reciprocal influence on the performance of tasks. Therefore, the low proficiency of the subjects was concluded to be compensated by the test takers' non-linguistic knowledge such as situational, pragmatic, discoursal and collocational knowledge. These understandings can have significant implications for vocabulary teaching and learning and need further investigation.
- Since the study involved only male subjects, the effect of gender related variables on vocabulary learning through different task types remained undiscovered.
- This study investigated the differential effect of a limited number of task types on promotion of learners' vocabulary knowledge and the room is left for further investigation on characteristics of certain task types which are claimed to tap particular language skills.
- Variables such as participants' L1, learning style, intelligence and attitude are deemed to affect the rate and quality of task completion and vocabulary improvement. Further research is needed to investigate the effects and relationships of these variables in varying contexts.

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